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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 001372

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SUBJECT: UNOFFICIAL RESULTS ALL BUT SEAL FIRST ROUND WIN

REF: ANTANANARIVO 1369 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: With 82 percent of polling stations unofficially reporting results to the Ministry of Interior, President-candidate Ravalomanana is very likely to have the absolute majority of votes needed to prevail in the first round. It will be several days before the High Constitutional Court (HCC) completes its official tabulation and certifies a result. Observer teams continued to proclaim the election well-run but handicapped by systemic shortcomings. There was a stir early December 8 when the Interior Ministry closed its unofficial tabulation center for "technical difficulties" due to power outages. Lahiniriko's party will file a complaint for fraud, Pety is hunted by police for numerous alleged offenses, and former President Zafy emerged from slumber. END SUMMARY.

Ravalomanana Likely To Win In Round One

12. (SBU) With 82 percent of polling stations unofficially reporting to the Interior Ministry -- representing 6.6 million registered voters, four million of whom voted -- Ravalomanana has received 2.24 million votes for 56.4 percent of valid votes cast. With 400,000 - 700,000 ballots remaining unreported, the President is almost mathematically assured first round victory, assuming the HCC official tabulation matches unofficial figures. The HCC counting operation has a long way to go before certifying the election, as trucks and helicopters deliver polling station affidavits and ballots.

CNOE Emphasizes Calm

13. (U) In preliminary results December 8, the Committee for National Election Observers (CNOE) said the vote was calm and the pre-electoral campaign was reasonably fair. CNOE Secretary General Bruno Rakotoarison noted the period was non-violent, but pointed out great disparities in candidates' resources. CNOE thus called for campaign finance regulations to level the political playing field.

14. (U) Calling on the observations of 2,124 CNOE monitors -- funded by the USG and trained by the National Democratic Institute -- Rakotoarison commended the process on several points: observers had free access; voters were free of interference; voting station officials were competent. Rakotoarison, like other observer teams, criticized the errors in electoral lists. CNOE also made priority recommendations for electoral reform: a cap on voters per polling

station of 800; a single ballot; and an overhaul of the electoral list system.

African International Observers

¶15. (SBU) African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat statements were predictably soft, generally praising the election while vaguely noting irregularities. The more independent SADC Parliamentary Forum made a strong statement December 7, emphasizing several aspects of Madagascar's election which did not meet minimum SADC standards.

¶16. (SBU) In a December 8 meeting with the Ambassador, Team Leader and SADC-PF Vice-Chairperson Duke Lefhoko (of Botswana) said the pre-election period had been almost "too calm" compared to the normal excitement he had witnessed in eight previous observer missions. He concurred that the polling had been generally free and fair, while also citing certain procedural concerns, notably the government's dominant role in running the election.

Interior Ministry Computers Crash?

¶17. (SBU) The Interior Ministry's public (unofficial) tabulation center temporarily closed with "technical difficulties" due to power outages at 0730 December 8 and is still not open. The Ministry caused much confusion as international journalists scrambled to read notices posted outside the room, speculating what might "really" be going on (Note: While probably nothing, the closure is reminiscent of former President Ratsiraka's move in 2001 to stop posting results when things were going bad for him. End Note). The story will likely blow over once the center reopens and an explanation is offered, but in the meantime journalists are looking for an interesting spin on an otherwise boring election story.

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Lahiniriko Claims Fraud

¶18. (SBU) Candidate Jean Lahiniriko, hovering at ten percent of the vote in third place, just behind Ratsiraka, announced his intention to deposit a formal complaint of fraud at the HCC. Challenging the declarations of international observers, Lahiniriko's supporters allege that electoral list and voter card problems were not mere "random mistakes." They will try to prove Ravalomanana inflated lists to increase his vote count, while omitting names of opposition supporters.

Pety On the Lam

¶19. (SBU) Several media outlets continue to pay attention to the arrest warrant for candidate and mayor of Fianarantsoa Pety Rakotoniaina; newspapers speculate he is suspected of obstruction of the vote, theft (in 2004), and even conspiracy to attempt murder. Pety, known to be close to renegade coup-plotting General Fidy, has now - like the General - gone into hiding to avoid arrest.

Zafy Albert Mouthpiece Spouts Off at U.S.

¶110. (SBU) Having been graciously silent and harmless during the electoral campaign, impeached former President Zafy Albert placed an acidic editorial in La Tribune December 8. Zafy's supporter, Emmanuel Rakotovahiny, made the argument that the United States was to blame for the election taking place when it never should have. For the umpteenth time Zafy called for a transition government for reconciliation, while accusing the 13 opposition candidates of abandoning Madagascar by participating in a "sham" election.

COMMENT: IT LOOKS LIKE RAVALOMANANA HAS WON

¶11. (SBU) It is unlikely, although still possible, that the HCC

official tabulation will vary from current estimates to change the expected result: a first round victory for Marc Ravalomanana. Opposition reactions are warming up on Day 5 of the count, and should accelerate in the coming week. As long as Ravalomanana's tally remains well above the 50 percent mark, these complaints are unlikely to gain much traction; if the President's first round margin narrows considerably the opposition may unite in crying foul and demanding a second round poll. So far the big success of the election appears to be rigorous domestic and international observation which generally lauds implementation while criticizing the electoral system. The loudest and most credible complaint concerns the voter lists; leaving egg on the European Union's face for their two million euro investment. Non-Europeans comment the computerization started too late, and focused too much on technology instead of actual quality of the lists for the election. To be fair, an electoral law that did not close the lists until three days before the election left no margin for error. END COMMENT.

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